

Relocating Sri Aurobindo's Aesthetics and Urdu Literature

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Abstract

Sri Aurobindo could not directly influence the Urdu world. Perhaps he was not properly known as a mystic philosopher all over the world. His fame as a mystic obscured his importance as a poet and aesthetician. This is perhaps another reason why his impact is not felt o Urdu literature. After independence, the trend literature underwent a change. Along with this change, more attention was paid to the past and present Indian thinkers. In this context, the main representatives of Indian Renaissance, of whom Sri Aurobindo is one of the most prominent figures, became relevant for us. A deep study of Sri Aurobindo's Aesthetics reveals that his ideas on literature have much relevance for the contemporary intellectual and creative situation in our country. The relevance of Sri Aurobindo's Aesthetic for creative activity in Urdu can be discussed from three different points of view. In this paper I have made attempt to deal with this problem on three levels. Firstly, his place and role in the Indian Renaissance is to be compared with that of Iqbal, an Urdu poet of world-statue, whose thought and poetry is the culmination of the spirit of Indian Renaissance in Urdu. This study may provide a background for the relevance of Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry to Urdu. Secondly, I have elaborated his theory of poetry in order to find out how far is it applicable to Urdu literature. Thirdly, some important literary issue are discussed to establish the relevance of Sri Aurobindo's theory of future poetry in the context of contemporary Urdu literature.

Key Words: Aesthetics, Literature, Renaissance, Urdu Literature, Mystic

The cultural and literary Renaissance in India, which organised in the reforms movements of the second half of the 19th century, reached its culmination in the 20th century in Tagore, Iqbal, and Sri Aurobindo. All three attempted to reconcile the best and the most living elements of the Indian tradition and the new world outlook. Mystic overtones are predominant in all the three poet thinkers. Though Iqbal, in his later years, was obsessed by the concern for the revival of true Islamic spirit, yet he remains essentially a representative of the Indian

Renaissance. Iqbal philosophy, like Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, is synthetic in character. Iqbal presented a synthesis of Indian, Western and Islamic philosophies. Aurobindo in his synthesis of the Western and Eastern outlooks, gives due importance to the influence of Islam on Indian culture. He has often referred to Sufis along with Bhakti saints, as the exponents of the spirituality of India. Aurobindo has highlighted Tagore's literary achievements, but reference to Iqbal is conspicuous by its absence in his writings. The comparative

study of Iqbal and Aurobindo can reveal not only certain similarities but also their identity. Aurobindo reinterpreted Vedantic philosophy in modern terms. He stands in strong opposition to Sankara's negativistic interpretation of Vedanta, particularly his illusionism. Aurobindo considers the physical world true and real as the inevitable expression of the creative power of Brahman, Iqbal also criticised Sankara's Advaita Vedanta for regarding the universe as Maya. He agrees with Ramanuja, who in his view represents the true spirit of the *Gita*. Iqbal's influence on Modern Urdu literature is very significant. His philosophical approach and poetic vision are relevant even today in the present context. Aurobindo pointed out that the Renaissance in India was accompanied by the movements of orthodox Hindu revivalism. According to him throughout India the old religious sects and disciplines became strongly revitalised, vocal, and active and moved to a fresh self-affirmation. He writes,

Islam has recently shared in the general stirring and attempts to return vitally to the original Islamic ideals or to strike out fresh developments that have preceded or accompanied the awakening to life of the long torpid Musalman mass in India (Aurobindo, 1956, pp.46-47).

Iqbal's endeavour to return to original Islamic ideals was in accordance with the general tendency of his time.

Literary Renaissance in Urdu can trace its starting point in Ghalib, but it became more effective in the Aligarh Movement initiated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his contemporary's viz. Mohd. Husain Azad; Hali, Nazir Ahmad, Shibli and Akbbar. Sir Syed's main aim was to popularize the modern Western outlook and sciences among Indian Muslims. He tried to reconcile Islamic religion and Western Sciences. Such attempts may be justifiably considered as futile today, but at that time such attempts were necessary in order to overcome the prejudices of the orthodox Muslim mind. Iqbal was better occupied than Sir Syed for the reconstruction of Islamic religious thought and he attempted to this task. Sri Aurobindo himself felt the need of such reconstruction in Hinduism. Both Iqbal and Aurobindo anticipated the possibilities of the fusion of different reactions of Western influence. According to Aurobindo the awakening vision and impulse, arising from the Indian Renaissance in order to determine its future tendency, needs firstly the recovery of the old spiritual knowledge and experience in all its splendour, depth and fullness, secondly the flowing of the spirituality into new forms of philosophy, literature, art,

sciences and critical knowledge, and thirdly and original dealing with modern problems to formulate a greater synthesis of a spiritual society (Aurobindo, 1951, p.26).

Iqbal might have agreed with this view, because his reconstruction of religious thought on the one hand, and his poetry on the other, and possibilities to fulfil this task. Iqbal was a philosopher-poet to whom the function of poetry was to give a message, which formed a part of the prophet's mission. Aurobindo clearly distinguishes the role of a poet from that of a prophet or a reformer, but at the same time he accepts the place of philosophical thought in poetry. His own poetic works specially Savitri, are philosophical in character, content and the treatment of the basic themes. Aurobindo's outlook is fundamentally mystical and his theory of poetry also has mystic overtones. Iqbal, in the stricter sense of the term, is not a mystic but his poetry and poetic vision have dominant mystical elements. In the sense in which some aspects of Iqbal's thought and poetry are relevant to contemporary Urdu literature, in the same sense Aurobindo theory of poetry, in spite of his stress on spirituality which may appear to be not much in harmony with modern temperament, has relevance for modern Urdu literature. It may be said, with a few reservations, that his aesthetic in a more modernised form can provide a secure

theoretical ground for contemporary literature. The modern concept of literature has many points of agreement in Aurobindo's theory of future poetry.

Aesthetics, in Aurobindo's view, is mainly concerned with beauty, but more generally with Rasa, the response of the mind. It may be spiritual feeling, but not necessarily. He does not equate aesthetics with over-mind, which is essentially a spiritual power; it sees universal and eternal beauty and transforms it. It is specially connected with truth and knowledge, or rather with a wisdom that exceeds all knowledge. It has the truth of spiritual thought, which comes by the most intimate spiritual touch or by identity. Over mind's purpose is not a limited aesthetical artisticism (Aurobindo, 1954, p, pp.842-843). It has an essential aesthesis, which is not limited by rules and canons. By aesthesis Aurobindo means a reaction of the consciousness, mental and vital and even bodily, that can awaken the soul to something deeper and more fundamental than mere pleasure and enjoyment, the spirits delight, Ananda. Universal Ananda is the parent of aesthesis (Aurobindo, 1954, p.930). The overhead poetry, in its highest form, comes from over-mind, but all overhead poetry is not from the over-mind. More often it comes from simply intuitive, illumined or strong and higher revealing thought. Ordinary aesthetics, which may

degenerate into aestheticism of the theory of “Arts for Art’s sake”, cannot appreciate the overhead element in poetry (Aurobindo, 1954, pp.843-844).

To an analytic and positivist mind, it may all appear to be metaphysical jargon. Aurobindo has coined new terms to emphasise certain qualities of poetry, but his views are similar to mystic views; which have been prevalent in ancient and medieval literatures. He differs from Sufi poets only so far that poetry, according to him, is not received as revelation from outside but evolves from within. The main source of Aurobindo’s aesthesis is Vedas. He regards Mantra as poetic expression of the deepest reality (Aurobindo, 1972, p.17). Mantra is the rhythmic revelation or intuition arising out of the soul’s sight of God and nature and the world and the inner truth (Aurobindo, 1972, p.34). Vedic poets mean by Mantra an inspired and revealed seeing and thinking attended by a realisation (Aurobindo, 1972, p.199).

Aurobindo is critical of the approaches of the ordinary uninstructed mind and intellectually conscientious artist or critic. To the common man, poetry gives nothing but pleasure. It is a sort of elevated pastime. To the intellectualist, poetry is mainly a matter of a faultlessly correct or at most an exquisite technique. According to Aurobindo, pleasure is only the first

element, which serves the high requirements of the intelligence, the imagination, and the ear. Intelligence, imagination and ear are only channels and instruments of the soul, who is true hearer of poetry. Technique is also the first step towards perfection and occupies a smaller field in poetry. Rhythmic word is the instrument of poetic creation. It’s thought value and sound value have separately or together a soul value. Poetry determines its own form. The poet, least of all artists, needs to be anxious about technique (Aurobindo, 1972, pp.9-11). Aurobindo, in his letters on Savitri, has discussed different aspects of the craft of poetry and severely criticises the grammatical obsession of some critics. A purely technical approach fails to appreciate the true spirit of poetry. Poetry arrives at the indication of infinite meanings beyond the finite intellectual meaning the word carries. The whole style and rhythm are the expression of the spiritual excitement caused by a vision in prose and ordinary speech. Poetic style is a much higher use of speech than its use in prose and ordinary speech. A higher adequacy of speech is its first object which helps to achieve its second object, forcefulness and effectiveness. Poetry goes beyond this limit and aims at a more striking rhythmic balance, uses images for sheer vision, opens itself to a mightier breath of speech. Poetic

vision whether of God or anything else, of nature or man, is essentially cosmic vision, universal and eternal vision. The lower kind of poetry does not reach this stage. Aurobindo is aware of the fact that quality of high poetry is not peculiar to mystic poetry. Mir, Dard, Aatish, Ghalib, and Iqbal's best works fulfil the conditions of great poetry laid down by Aurobindo.

Aurobindo does not regard the poet as a philosopher, but he gives an important place to philosophy in poetry. Abstract ideas have no place in higher poetry; they are always concretised in the form of images, arising from poetic vision (Aurobindo, 1954, p.833). Poetic truth is always qualitatively different from religious, philosophical, or scientific truth. Aurobindo regards a realistic theory of literature also as one-sided and defective, which reduces literature to mere photography or copy of the reality. Idealist art can bring down poetry to a lower level. Great poetry may be prophetic in character but essentially it gives no direct message:

It must be vision pouring itself into thought-images and not thought trying to observe truth and distinguish (Aurobindo, 1972, p.32).

Delight and beauty are soul of poetry which guarantees its universality; Rasa is the essence of poetry, which meant for ancient Indian critics

a concentrated taste, a spiritual essence of emotion, an essential aesthesis, the soul's pleasure in the pure and perfect sources of feeling (Aurobindo, 1972, p.243).

Poetic geniuses combine Rasa and truth and sublimate them. Aurobindo claims for the poet the role of a seer truth, but it does not mean that a poet should have an intellectual philosophy of life or a message for humanity. As a man he may have these but as a poet has to transcend these limitations. This view may be confirmed by the majority of modern Urdu writers, who emphasise the poetic value of poetry more than its others values. Religious, ethical, political and social values have a secondary place in poetry. In Urdu literary criticism there has been a trend to over emphasise a poet's milieu. This dogma of historical and sociological school of criticism asks of us to study the historical and sociological factors of poetry, but consequently ignores its poetic value. It evaluates the poet and his poetry from extra-poetic considerations and passes judgments that are irrelevant to literature. The recent trend in Urdu criticism gives priority to poetic work and agrees with Aurobindo that

Rather the very opposite is the true method of appreciation, to come straight to the poet and his poem for

all we need essentially to know about them (Aurobindo, 1972, p.39).

The emphasis on a work of art as a sole object of our study does not necessarily mean to ignore the study does not necessarily mean to ignore the importance of the study of milieu, the historic situation, the time element, and the relation between the poet and his hearers. All these constitute a considerable part of literary criticism. Aurobindo gives them their due, but considers the element of eternity and universality of supreme value. A great poet reflects the spirit of his age, but also at the same time transcends it. An idea of the stages and character of the national evolution of poetry is relevant for the full understanding of a poet. The individual poet and his poetry are part of this movement. This study can be fruitful

if we observe them from the point of view not so much of things external to poetry, but of its own spirit and characteristic forms and motives (Aurobindo, 1972, p.43).

In Urdu, under the influence of the theory of socialistic realism we have been committing the mistake of considering time factors as something external to literature. Aurobindo's views suggest a remedy for it. The basic characteristics of the 19th century Western literature, as pointed out by Aurobindo, are search for new ideals;

pronounced conscious subjectivity; awakening of man to himself owing to the scientific, historic and critical interests in man; objectivistic realism; and concern for future. Some of these characteristics may be traced in the 19th century Urdu literature. Awakening of man and a pronounced conscious subjectivity with a search for new ideals and concern for human fate are the dominant tones in Ghalib's and Iqbal's poetry. Urdu literature of this period differs from the Western literature of that period only in some minor details due to the difference of milieu. Urdu literature combined the elements of Western romanticism and naturalism with the spirit of the Indian Renaissance. Romanticism emanated from the attempts of revitalising the ideals of the Indian culture. Knowledge of the Western culture, philosophy, sciences and literature exercised a liberalising influence of the Indian mind, and secularised our concept of knowledge, state, society and politics. The progressive writers emphasised on the objectivistic, positivistic and realistic elements of literature. Here we find that Aurobindo's criticism of the realist school as the most appropriate and valid. He said that out of the period of dominant objective realism emerged quite an opposite movement of pronounced and conscious subjectivity. The phenomenal growth of the movement of modernity in Urdu literature

after independence confirms Aurobindo's views in this context.

The progressive literature, in spite of its claims for realism, was predominantly romantic, which romanticised the ideals of social change and revolution. In this brand of romanticism, subjectivity was suppressed and there was no trace of transcendence in it. The writers of this period reflected the spirit of their age in naked language, which could not transcend the accepted meanings of the words. This literature had some of the essential features of the modern literature explained by Aurobindo with certain modifications. It reflects a transition from other worldliness to earthliness, from intuitive closeness to directness of poetic language, from revivalist tendencies of the renaissance literature to literal and secular humanism and from spirituality to faith in man and his power of creativity. It discovered a new power of rhythm and introduced a free form of poetic expression. It ascribed new meanings to old and stereotyped symbols, which in their turn become themselves stereotypes in course of time due to their non-creative use. The progressives rightly rejected the concepts of pure poetry and aestheticism. The best creations of this period have some traces of subjectivity and transcendentalism, not in the metaphysical sense, but in a broader poetic sense. Awakening to the problems of

man was also reflected in that period but could not fully grow because of their stress on collective social awareness.

Modern literature found the conditions favourable for its full and natural growth in recent times. Disillusionment with social and political ideals in the wake of independence, bathed and blood turned the eyes of creative writers from outward to inward reality. Recent literature in Urdu is more subjectivistic in character, with an emphasis on intuitive closeness and directness, and reconciles the individual and universal meaning of life and nature. It explores fresh possibilities of poetic expression. In some cases it totally deviates from classical and traditional styles and discovers a new idiom for poetry. It is not divorced from social reality, but is actually aware of the needs of the time. In Aurobindo view's man has become the central problem of study in modern times. Individual man and various aspects of his complex personality is the main subject of contemporary Urdu literature. The contemporary Urdu writer, like his contemporaries all over the world and especially in India, does not regard his historic situation as something external, but treats it rightly as emerging from within. His greatest problem is to find out ways to disalienate himself. Contemporary society, highly industrialised and institutionalised,

gives the least liberty to the individual. The tyranny of political ideologies uses him as an instrument or negligible part of the gigantic machinery of social institutions. Life has lost its meaning. We have to discover individual and universal meaning of life and seek the means of integration of the split personality. Aurobindo rightly anticipated the modern predicament of man by suggesting that modern literature is concerned with the totality of man's being (Aurobindo, 1972, p.197). Recent Urdu literature is not spiritual in the religious sense, but it has some mystical qualities. It is trying to rise above the sickening intellectualism and physicalism. The ways adopted by different writers are different. Some have become sceptics; some are trying to evolve a new cult for God, nature and super-nature. All these directions of creative activity in search of liberty and personal identity were anticipated by Aurobindo (Aurobindo, 1972, pp.109-110). Sri Aurobindo's theory of future poetry is relevant to contemporary Urdu literature in more than one sense. He had made the following observations:

...the new force of subjectivism will have probably the effect of rehabilitating the religious and spirituality idealistic element in our vision of the future of the race (Aurobindo, 1972, p.108).

...it may get back into the truth of the inner spirit and work in an intimate identity, relation or close dwelling upon it, and then what it will do is to give a new revelation of our being and life and thought and nature and the material and the psychical and spiritual words (Aurobindo, 1972, p.196).

The more perfectly intuitive poetry of the future, supposing it to emerge successively from its present incubation, find itself and develop all its possibilities, will not be a mystic poetry recondite in expression or quite remote from the earthly life of man (Aurobindo, 1972, p.197).

The third observation is very important. The contemporary poetry is not mystic poetry. It is more closely bound to the earth. But as Aurobindo says, an element of mysticism is inevitable for poetry, and the recent poetry in Urdu mostly emerges from the existential experience, the experience of total being. It means active participation of the being in the flux of time and creating, not only itself a new at every moment, but also changing the whole field of existence, i.e. the historic situation and social and physical environment. Existential experience is a new name for mystic experience, which seeks identity between man and nature, and eternity. I have deliberately avoided the term God and replaced it by eternity.

Seeking identity with God is only one form of man's aspiration for eternity. The creative urge can make life and the universe more than meaningful.

Aurobindo suggested that the future poetry will have to solve two problems. Firstly, it has to solve the problem of the art of poetic speech, i.e. to express in the very inmost language of the self-experience the reality experienced. Secondly, the poet has to find the language of the identity of objective and subjective realities, and he will have even to discover new symbols and figures to assist the mere direct utterance, in different fashion, less as a veil, more as a real correspondence (Aurobindo, 1972, pp.283-287).

Aurobindo lays down three conditions for the emergence of this new poetic inspiration and significant poetic speech: firstly, the spiritualisation of human feeling and intelligence; secondly, the fusion of perfect joy and satisfaction of the subtlety and complexity of a finer psychic experience with strength and amplitude of the life soul of the earth; and thirdly, a greater self-vision of man and nature, i.e. cosmic vision.

Recent Urdu literature in general and poetry in particular, is seeking to evolve a new highly subjective language of feeling and intellect and unified vision of man and nature. It is predominantly earth bound but has such future possibilities which lead to

the spiritualisation of scientific knowledge. Contemporary Urdu poetry is not great in any sense, because it is experimenting, deviating from tradition, and trying to recover the supreme power of speech. At present, a majority of contemporary poets are not capable of expressing their own genuine existential experience but only imitating more genuine poets and following a popular fashion. But some of them can emerge as significant major poets of the future. Aurobindo's theory of future poetry is at least partly applicable to the Urdu poetry.

Conclusion:

Despite Sri Aurobindo's metaphysical terminology and mystical approach, the study and analysis of his theory may prove helpful for the development of future poetry. A considerable part of Sri Aurobindo's criticism of literature has been proved true and valid in the context of the development of Urdu literature, in spite of the fact that Aurobindo never referred to Urdu due to his unfamiliarity with literature in this language. This realisation can lead Urdu writers to acquaint themselves with Aurobindo's theory aesthetics. The modern mind can differ from aspects of his mystical approach, but it should not ignore his philosophy of art and poetry, Aurobindo, in the technical sense, is perhaps the only original philosopher of modern India. He

deserves to be studied deeply. In my view in exploring the future possibilities of the
his theory of poetry is relevant to literary expression of poetic vision.
contemporary literature and can be helpful

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